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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS MOLETAI -- A REGION IN TRANSITION

¶1. Ambassador Cloud traveled November 13 to the Moletai district, a region transforming from a relatively poor, agrarian-based economy to one based mainly on domestic tourism to the vast woodlands and lakes in the area. In the first meeting of the day, he sat down with the long time Mayor of Moletai and recently elected MP, Valentinas Stundys, who stressed the need to keep dialogue with the public at the community level, noting that "at the bottom you can see when politics takes a wrong turn."

¶2. The Ambassador also met with leaders of the Balninkai Community Center, an NGO that in past years has used Baltic American Partnership Funds to help the people of the region transition to a more modern economy through lecture series and computer training. This NGO also sponsors social services such as care for the elderly and town beautification projects. The Ambassador praised the NGO leadership for its use of funds to maintain community pride in the post-Soviet era and he urged them to look to both the GOL and EU for additional moneys. Note: Baltic American Partnership funding ends in 2008.

¶3. Ambassador Cloud also visited the Suginciu School, notable because it receives funding from the U.S. GLOBE program and also because of the school's outreach and education fundraising in Moletai city and the surrounding region. He also took a tour of Moletai's history and cultural heritage museum and closed the day with a visit to the famed Moletai Observatory, home to one of the largest telescopes in Northern Europe.

¶4. The Ambassador's trip attracted media interest. The Moletai weekly "Vilnis" covered his meeting with Mayor Stundys. Later in the day he gave an interview to another weekly, "Moletu Zinios," with whom he shared favorable impressions of the region, and discussed elections and financial challenges in both the U.S. and Lithuania.

¶5. Comment: The Ambassador found Valentinas Stundys a modest and thoughtful politician. A former teacher, he actually turned down an opportunity to be considered for Minister of Health and Social Services in the new Conservative-led coalition because he did not think he was qualified, preferring instead to focus on his forte of education.

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